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Center

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HR

Africa Review

Supplement
8 December 1978

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Sudan: Numayri's Ethiopian Dilemma

In the wake of the recent reversals suffered by the Eritrean guerrillas at the hands of Ethiopian forces, the Sudanese Government is reassessing its policy toward Ethiopia. The Numayri regime is confronted with a difficult choice. It can continue to allow Sudan to be used as a conduit for aid to the Eritrean insurgents and risk Ethiopian retaliation by attempts to stir up trouble in southern Sudan, or it can deny the use of Sudanese territory to the Eritreans and incur the anger of the rebels' Arab supporters, especially Saudi Arabia. At present, the pressures to continue supporting the Eritreans appear to outweigh the incentives to stop.

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The Sudanese have been active proponents of the unification of the three major insurgent groups and have sponsored meetings in Khartoum designed to promote this. Their efforts have been unsuccessful, however. The loss of Keren, the last major city under Eritrean control, has been attributed in large part to the failure of the Marxist Eritrean Popular Liberation Front to obtain the support of the other two groups. In recent weeks serious clashes have occurred between the moderate socialist Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Muslim-dominated Eritrean Liberation Front/Popular Liberation Forces. The latest fighting was apparently initiated by the ELF and on at least two occasions spread to Sudanese territory.

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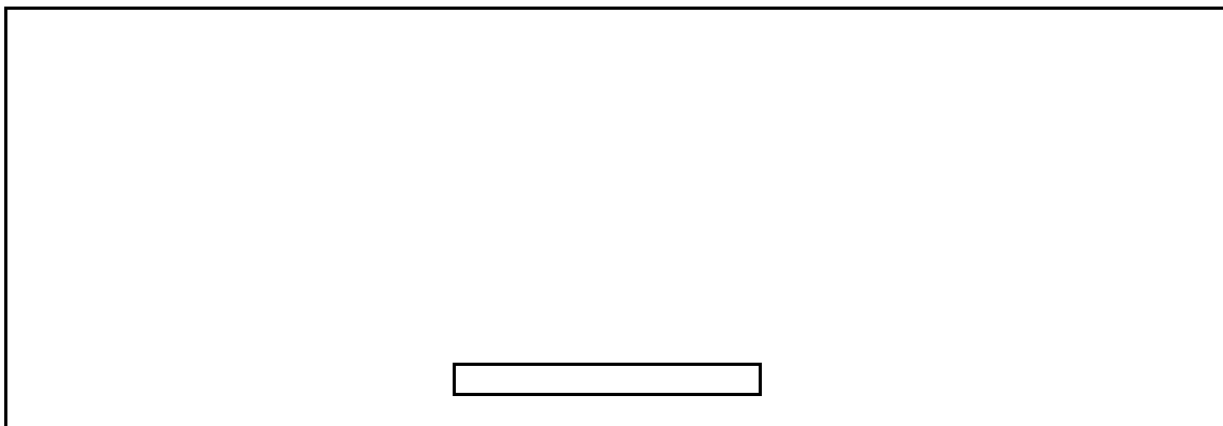
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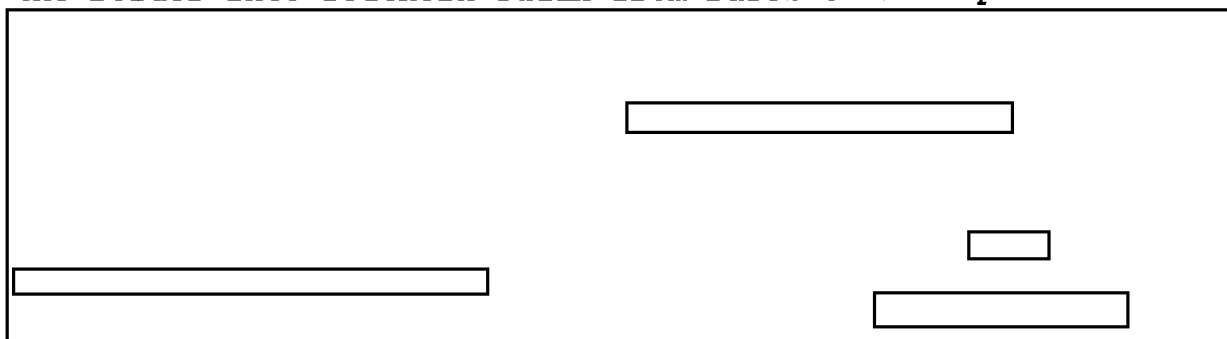
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Continued support of the Eritreans will increase the risk of Ethiopian-Sudanese border clashes. In late November, Ethiopian regular forces attacked an Ethiopian Democratic Union camp in Sudanese territory, and since mid-October, the Ethiopians have been supporting former southern Sudanese rebels who have been raiding across the border into southern Sudan from bases in Ethiopia.

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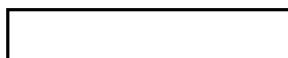
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The Sudanese would prefer, if possible, to avoid a direct conflict with Ethiopia. They are conscious of Ethiopian military superiority and believe that the recent Eritrean defeats will free major Ethiopian units for deployment along the Ethiopian-Sudanese border. Following the attack on the Ethiopian Democratic Union camp in late November, Sudanese forces were ordered to engage the Ethiopians, but not to pursue them across the border. Numayri has repeatedly indicated his desire to meet with Ethiopian leader Mengistu to arrange a political solution to problems between the two countries and the Sudanese President reportedly plans to raise the possibility of such a meeting with Tanzanian President Nyerere in Dar es Salaam on 9 December.

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Nevertheless, it appears unlikely that Numayri has any immediate intention of reversing Sudanese policy and preventing support from reaching the Eritreans through Sudanese territory. To do so could cause Sudan serious difficulties with Saudi Arabia. Sudanese officials are already fearful that Sudanese support of the Camp David accords could lead the Saudis to reconsider their decision to help ease Sudan's financial plight. Since mid-1978, Saudi Arabia has provided Sudan with \$350 million in aid and rescheduled their share of Sudanese official debt on highly favorable terms. It is possible that if the Eritrean setbacks lead to a Saudi decision to cease or limit the support for the insurgents, Numayri might then be willing to limit the support for the rebels as part of an understanding with Mengistu. There is no indication at this time, however, that the Saudis have decided to end their support for the Eritreans.

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